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ABSTRACT

General issues in the development of programs for language minority children at the preschool level, ages 2-4, are discussed. Focus is on the need to meet their comprehensive needs, and the five following points are made: (1) programs should be designed to serve the child's social/emotional, physical, and cognitive development within the context of the family and community and the programs must employ developmentally appropriate practices that respect individual differences and choices; (2) parents should be an integral part of the programs, which must also incorporate the family and home culture; (3) staff should be trained to provide comprehensive services to young children; (4) programs should not segregate children according to family income, and all children should have equal access to quality programming; and (5) adequate and consistent funding is needed. Implications of each point are discussed. It is concluded that, faced with increased stress and poverty, as well as changing lifestyles, demographics, and social issues, the language minority family requires services to strengthen it and support the development of healthy, competent young children. Contains 26 references. (LB)

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Early Childhood Programs For Language Minority Children

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Preface

American schools are undergoing considerable change. One significant change is in the composition of the school population. By the end of the 1990s many school districts will have mostly students that come from ethnic, linguistic, and racial minority families. Among these students, those who come from homes where a language other than English is spoken present new challenges to many educators.

Children who will be entering middle schools by the end of this decade are now entering preschool programs. Early childhood programs should take into consideration the cultural and linguistic characteristics of all children if these programs are to provide for appropriate development.

What follows is an overview of general issues in the development of programs for language minority children at the preschool level (ages 2–4).

Introduction

Parents are the primary teachers of all young children.

Bowman (1989) points out that "children are taught to act, believe and feel in ways that are consistent with the mores of their communities" (p. 119). Parents provide opportunities to learn and practice culturally acceptable behaviors and practices; and, Bowman further adds, "these practices and behaviors are gradually internalized and contribute to the definition of self" (p. 119). To promote the healthy self-esteem of each and every young child, early childhood education programs must be thoughtfully designed to serve both parents and children—all the more so for those who speak a language other than English at home.

Early childhood education programs are especially designed to meet the comprehensive needs of young children, ages birth through eight. From a programmatic perspective, early childhood is often subdivided into several age-related areas: infancy (birth to two years), preschool (two to four years), kindergarten (five years) and primary grades (six to eight years) (Nurss & Hodges 1982).

Early childhood education in public schools

Although there has been controversy regarding effective approaches for serving the educational needs of limited English proficient students (Santiago 1985), there are many examples of effective programs for these children in grades K–12. Given the needs and changes affecting families in our country, bilingual educators should take a serious look at how to meet the needs of yet younger children from language minority families, especially at ages 2–4.

Many early childhood programs created outside the public schools are designed to provide both child care and education for young children. Kagan observes (1989b) that "we cannot separate care and education . . . whether labeled child care or education, high-quality programs for preschoolers deliver both" (p. 112). If public schools are to begin serving young language minority children adequately, then certain conditions must exist to ensure appropriate delivery of services.

Kagan further suggests, first, that we should design programs that serve the whole child's (social/emotional, physical, and cognitive) development within the context of the family and community. These programs must employ developmentally appropriate practices that respect individual differences, choices, and recognize the individual child's development. Second, we must make the parents an integral part of the programs and incorporate the family and home culture. Third, staff should be trained to provide comprehensive services to young children. Fourth, programs should not segregate children according to family income—all young children should have equal access to quality programming. Fifth, in order to deliver these services, there must be adequate and consistent funding.

Appropriate programs for young language minority children

Programs for the young language minority child need to be designed to reinforce the strengths of each individual child and family. Developmental programs are designed to meet all the needs of young children and provide programming that is personally meaningful to each and every child within the context of the child's culture, primary language, and family. Some specific strategies needed to create such successful programs follow.

1. Serving the whole child within the context of the family and community

Research in early childhood programs points to the need for comprehensive programs for

young children and their families. The developmental nature of these programs requires that the social, emotional and physical needs of young children be met concurrently with their cognitive needs. Many families are finding it increasingly difficult to meet all of the needs of their young children. Kagan points out (1989b) that "health, social, special education, and parent support services must be included to meet the needs of young children" (p. 110). Schools must work cooperatively with both the family and social service agencies to ensure appropriately developed comprehensive programs.

The current interest in early childhood programs has brought the learning needs of young children to the public's attention. As Wingert and Kantrowitz (1989) observe, "ages 3 through 8 are the wonder years. That is when children begin learning to learn, to reason, and cooperate. We can put them in desks and drill them all day. Or we can keep them moving, touching, exploring" (p. 4). This touches upon some important questions regarding the planning of programs to meet the needs of the whole child. For example, with the development of more programs for young children, will educators develop skill-based programs to reflect their needs? Or will they develop programs that reflect all the needs (social/emotional, physical, and cognitive) of young children?

Implications. To ensure the success of all young language minority children in developmental settings, educators need to create learning environments that are culturally and linguistically relevant.

The Head Start Multicultural Task Force (1989) notes that "multicultural programming incorporates approaches that validate and build upon the culture and strengths of the child and family" (p. 1). This approach requires that educators examine their own expectations and biases as well as incorporate materials and activities that have special relevance to the children. According to Ramsey (1982), "the goal is not to teach children about [different] cultures but rather to help children become accustomed to the idea that there may be many life styles, languages, and points of view" (p. 20). Young children tend to personalize their learning and focus on themselves. The family is the group of greatest importance to young children (Derman-Sparks et al. 1989). Multicultural educational experiences validate each child's family and thus promote healthy self-concepts. To ensure the development of a positive nurturing environment that reflects both the dominant and home cultures is an important task that can be accomplished by well-trained educators.

Differences in culture between home and school are not the only issue in the particular case of language minority children. These children often come from homes where English is not spoken. This may result in preschool programs where all of the young children speak a language other than English. In these programs the educators ideally should speak the home language of the children in order to assist these children in their development. In other programs there may be a mixture of English speaking and non-English speaking children. If all of the non-English speaking children speak the same language, then, ideally, the teacher should also be a speaker of that language. Yet in other preschool programs there will be a mixture of English speaking children as well as non-English speaking children who come from homes where different languages are spoken. Since this situation will most likely become common throughout the country, issues related to preschool programs with linguistically heterogenous students will be considered briefly here.

As Bowman (1989) points out, "learning a primary language is a developmental milestone

for young children and is, therefore, a 'developmentally appropriate' educational objective." It takes a child a considerable amount of time to learn his/her primary language. Chomsky (1969) showed that children between the years 5 and 10 are still in the process of acquiring a number of important syntactic structures (in English).

Children acquire their primary language in ways that are similar across languages, although not identical. An English speaking child who masters the difference between /l/ and /w/ before the age of 5 will be developing as expected; Spanish speaking children who learn to trill the /r/ in words such as *rosa* and *arroz* by the age of 5 will be recognized as having reached a major milestone in their development of Spanish pronunciation. Edwards and Gandini (1989) add further, "teachers cannot operate appropriately without guidelines for knowing what to expect of children of a given age" (p. 19). In effect, teachers should know more about cultural and linguistic differences in expectations for children. Edwards and Gandini further observe that "good teachers . . . usually hold an attitude of respect for diversity" (p. 19).

2. Developmentally appropriate practices

Approaches to early childhood education can be clustered into two major groups: (1) academic/behaviorist, and (2) cognitive/developmental. The first approach was introduced in the 1960s, while the second approach is the further development of the traditional American early school education (Greenberg 1990).

The academic/behaviorist approach is characterized by the assumption that there is a "fixed body of knowledge that four-year-olds need to master" (Greenberg 1990, p. 75). Programs based on this approach feature direct instruction with the teacher as schedule planner, a strong emphasis on mastery and testing, and the use of rewards as reinforcement for right answers (Greenberg 1990). The behaviorist approach requires authoritarian management since classroom discipline is necessary if academic skills and concepts are to be mastered by young children. One salient characteristic of the academic/behaviorist approach is that children are to be motivated to act like adults and older children which, in our society, includes reading, writing, and computational skills (Greenberg 1990).

The cognitive/developmental approach assumes that young children "learn casually and naturally as they live their lives, and that play . . . is valuable learning" (Greenberg 1990, p. 72). This learning goes on developmentally as the child matures. Intellectual learning is fostered but not given priority over physical, social, and emotional learning. Self-discipline is encouraged as is self-esteem. In a cognitive/developmental approach children are encouraged to become involved in purposeful and creative activities with other children; to make major choices among hands-on learning activities; to initiate and accomplish self-motivated tasks within a rich environment; and to construct knowledge at their own individual pace by discovering and engaging in open-ended activities that reflect all areas of their development while dialoguing with supportive adults. Parents can play a key role in this approach.

Current research in early childhood education clearly points to the benefits of the cognitive/developmental approach for all young children. Early childhood programs based on this approach are said to reflect developmentally appropriate practice. This approach encompasses theories associated with John Dewey, Barbara Biber, Jean Piaget, David Weikart, and David Elkind, among others, and it has

been advocated by the National Association for the Education of Young Children since 1926 (Greenberg 1990).

Bredekamp and Sheppard (1989) suggest that to ensure the success of young learners and to plan for appropriate environments, teachers, program directors, and administrators must become familiar with developmentally appropriate practices. These pedagogical practices ensure that the program reflects the development of the whole child. These practices are described fully in *Developmentally Appropriate Practices in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8* (Bredekamp 1987). This guide helps planners and practitioners alike by outlining both appropriate and inappropriate practices for young children. Appropriate curriculum design and teaching strategies are also specified. These strategies ensure each child's right to be respected for his/her individuality, and promote lifelong learning in addition to the acquisition of needed skills.

Implications. The developmental approach to planning programs for young children is especially appropriate for language minority children. This type of program can provide enriching experiences for each child to act upon individually. There are no preconceived notions as to the correct method of interaction with materials. Experiences in art, music, small/gross motor activities, along with language arts, are provided in environments which accept each child's individual development and encourage each child to purposefully interact with and extract meaning from these experiences. Such experiences allow for individual differences and choices. Each child is valued as an individual learner, and each child's progress is evaluated individually. All children are regarded as capable of learning and each and every child's learning style, cultural point of reference and language are appreciated and valued. "It's simply a matter of thinking rich! Making assumptions about learners which reflect trust and expectations that they can reach individual potential and that their human development strategies will work for their benefit" (Urzúa 1985, pp. 7–8). Well-designed developmental early childhood programs should enhance the self-esteem of the young language minority child.

The implementation of developmentally appropriate practices and the creation of developmentally appropriate curricula is dependent upon the planner's knowledge of child development. However, as Bowman (1989) suggests, "teachers facing the challenge of teaching children from different cultural communities find themselves hard pressed to decide what constitutes appropriate curriculum."

Cultural diversity makes it difficult to assess each child's developmental status in each area of development. It has been found in recent research (e.g., Edwards & Gandini 1989) that developmental milestones or expectations vary from culture to culture. In order to design appropriate programs for language minority children, educators need to understand not only the values of a specific culture but the goals for socialization, beliefs about the nature of the child, and the various child rearing techniques.

Bowman (1989) asks whether it is possible to design a developmentally appropriate curriculum for a program that includes children from diverse cultures and who do not speak the same language. Given that children do not all develop in the same way (even in the case where the children all share the same language and culture), Bowman concludes that the same curriculum cannot be used for all children.

However, it is possible to develop a conceptual framework that a culturally sensitive

teacher might follow. Bowman (1990) suggests the following points that teachers should consider.

a. Developmentally equivalent patterns of behavior should be recognized.

All children learn similar things: language, systems of categorization, interpersonal communication styles, etc. Although these developmental accomplishments may appear to be quite different, they can also be seen as developmentally equivalent.

b. All equivalent developmental milestones should be given the same value.

How well a young child speaks his/her home language may be more important than how well he/she might speak English. A child might be verbally gifted when speaking the home language but speak English haltingly if at all.

c. Interactive styles familiar to the child should be used, including using the child's home language.

Many educators see preschool programs as an opportunity to promote the rapid acquisition of English. This is at variance with the whole idea of developmentally appropriate practices. Children at the age of 3 and 4 are still in the process of developing their first language. The consequences of very early second language acquisition may not be beneficial to all young children. Wong-Fillmore (in press) suggests that young children who rapidly learn their second language do so at the cost of losing interest and ability in their first or home language. The first language is the primary mode of communication between young children and their parents. Children are socialized to take part in their home and community through the home language. Given the importance of school/family connections, consideration must be given to the goals and objectives of early childhood education for language minority children.

d. Family values that promote learning should be reinforced.

The goals of the program should be explained to the parents so that they can cooperate and foster a positive attitude toward achievement in school.

e. Differences between home and school cultural patterns must be dealt with directly.

Teachers as well as parents have to become aware of possible discrepancies between home and school cultures. Language minority children may often find themselves trying to respond to conflicting home and school cultural expectations. Young Hispanic children may be expected to be quiet around adults but to "speak up" to the teacher in the classroom.

f. It should be recognized that the same content may have different meaning to different groups of children.

Bears are often portrayed as benign creatures in many stories for children. In Navajo culture, bears are usually depicted as wicked creatures (somewhat similar to the role of wolves in European folktales). A story about Smokey the Bear might be understood by Navajo children differently from the way non-Navajo children might understand it. This can result in confusion for the Navajo children and frustration on the part of the teacher. Alternate stories might have to be considered.

There seems to be substantial research to support the developmental approach to serv-

ing young children, yet there appears to be a genuine need for additional research to address the specific needs of language minority children. Many researchers argue that we must begin a child's education in the most supportive, nurturing environment possible. The use of the child's first language and the involvement of a teacher sensitive to the culture and customs of the child's family seem to be imperative to the success of early childhood education programs for language minority children.

The role of the parent in quality early childhood programs

Research in the field of early childhood education indicates that parental involvement is a necessary condition to ensure the success of all children in early childhood programs. Parents provide the needed link between home and school. As Honig (1979) points out, parents "play a crucial role in linking the child's home/community world with his formal learning" (p. 9). According to leading researchers in school and family issues, the key factor in determining a child's academic success is the parent (Olsen 1990).

Parents are traditionally recognized as the first teachers of their children. Parents are the advocates for their children in the adult world. Most parents follow their children's progress from year to year both inside and outside the school. Parents, along with other adult caregivers, help to teach and socialize each child during the most rapid growth period in human development: birth to five years of age. According to Comer (1980), "many kinds of development in social, psychological, emotional, moral, linguistic, and cognitive areas are critical to academic learning. The attitudes, values, and behavior of the family and its social network strongly affect such development" (p. 22). Therefore the home and school should ideally work effectively together and support one another in the job of nurturing and educating young children—care and education are inextricably linked. It follows that the family should not only be consulted as programs for young children are designed, but provisions to involve the parents in every aspect of these programs should likewise be mandatory.

In the United States today, one in every four children will live in a single parent home at some point while growing up. The traditional nuclear family represents less than 10 percent of all American households (Pooley & Littel 1986). Many children live in step- or blended families. Family membership constellations are becoming increasingly complex. A child may have a variety of parents: biological, step, or foster. The number of families with women as heads of household or with two working parents is increasing rapidly. In 1989, 52 percent of mothers with infants were employed in the workforce. By 1995 it is expected that this will increase to approximately 66 percent (Galinsky 1990).

The dynamic changes in lifestyles and social issues require the development of new strategies to assist parents with the difficult job of nurturing the development of healthy young children. A shift in focus from programs which seek to intervene in the development of children's social, cognitive, and other skills necessary for success in school to programs which emphasize the role of parents in their children's development represents a move to a more ecological systems approach. Family support programs provide information and support to parents in a respectful manner so that they can more effectively nurture the growth of their children.

These programs and strategies do not view the parent, in the words of Weissbourd

(1987), as "an empty vessel to be filled with appropriate information about child development, (but as) a person in a specific stage of adult development whose behavior (and actions) influence the development and general well-being of the child" (pp. 47–48). Armed with information about child development, support for the difficult job of parenting, and other needed social supports (i.e., child care, health, or welfare resources), parents can be encouraged to create a home environment that supports their children's learning.

Criticism of family lifestyles, language, culture, or socioeconomic status often result in alienation and apathy. Maintaining strong, healthy bonds between parents and children that preserve and enhance the children's abilities to succeed in school should be the first priority of any well-designed early childhood education program.

Implications. The importance of good cross-cultural communication cannot be overemphasized. Bilingual educators today work with families from a wide variety of cultures. The goals, aspirations, cultural mores, and values of each family must be respected by practitioners developing early childhood programs. Serious misinformation about schools and miscommunication between teachers and parents occur often. Language assessments, developmental screenings, and other evaluation and planning sessions should not be carried out without input from the parents. As Herrera and Wooden point out (1988) "the essential ingredients of effective school/parent communication are frequent, informal contacts and warm, respectful, honest conversation" (p. 80). Through both informal and formal contacts with parents, educators can become familiar with individual cultures, values, and practices.

Although some bilingual/bicultural young children are raised by families in disadvantaged circumstances which affect their development, most are not affected by learning disadvantages. "Their caregivers—whatever their economic and social circumstances—provide them with nurturance and a loving start for life, just as they should" (Wong-Fillmore 1988, p. 1). "We need to consider the assumptions underlying our educational policies toward language minority children, and the long-term consequences these policies will have, not only in terms of what happens to the children in school but what happens to the family as well. Society should not adopt education policies that diminish the role families must play in the socialization and education of their children, nor should it contribute to the breakdown of family unity" (Wong-Fillmore in press, p. 6).

Staff training and development

The philosophy and practices of early childhood education differ in many respects from those found in most elementary school settings today. The cornerstone of early childhood programs is child development. An understanding of the development of children in the early years provides a rationale and guidance for the design of the environment and curriculum needed for young children.

Appropriate staff development training is required in order to meet the needs of today's young children effectively. Included in such training are: hands-on experiences with appropriate practices, concrete examples illustrating the design of various models of early childhood programs and imaginative activities designed to assist teachers in the creation of the program, curriculum, and learning environment. All staff training should reflect appropriate developmental practices.

The comprehensive nature of early childhood programs requires that educators not only be familiar with appropriate teaching practices for the young child but requires teachers, administrators, and assistants alike to be skilled in their interactions with parents and the community. Strategies to promote positive home-school-community relationships should be included in inservice training for all early childhood educators.

Implications. Bilingual early childhood educators, like all early childhood educators, need to be thoroughly familiar with early childhood practices and philosophy to implement effective programs for young language minority children. In addition, educators need to be especially sensitive to the cultural and linguistic needs of these children. Strategies to promote the development of the home language will need to be designed for these programs. Multicultural curriculum offerings should become an integral part of all of these programs. Teacher training in cross-cultural communication will assist the bilingual practitioner to interact with language minority children and their families. Working with people from many cultures presents challenges and rewards to the bilingual educator.

Equal access to early childhood programs

Although public schools have been involved in the development of programs serving children younger than kindergarten age, these programs have been developed mostly outside of schools. Private non-profit child care, family day care, church nursery schools, corporate-sponsored child care, and Head Start programs are some of the existing structures providing care to young children prior to their enrollment in public schools.

Vast inequities in the quality of child care programs exist. Most middle and upper class families send their young children to fee-for-service, private or public, non-profit programs. Many low-income families are served by special programs such as Head Start. Differences in funding often result in programs serving young children mostly from one race or ethnic group. Although many states within the last ten years have funded pre-kindergarten programs, many of these programs do not specifically address the needs of young language minority children. Many states now support kindergarten programs for bilingual children.

According to Kagan (1989a), "there are vast inequities regarding children's eligibility and access to programs. Children are segregated by income, with limited choices and resources for low-income families" (p. 434). She further points out that "this economic segregation often leads to racial segregation, which does not reflect the law or the spirit of our nation" (p. 435). It must also be recognized that while many programs for middle and upper income families are described as enriching, learning experiences, programs for low-income families are usually described as necessary intervention programs to provide disadvantaged children with experiences needed to prepare them for school.

Implications. Since there is an increasing need for early education and care of young children in most parts of the country, it may not be apparent to the general public that language minority families need early childhood programs with special characteristics.

Participation in bilingual education programs at grades K–12 is not determined

by family economic factors, but by linguistic and other cultural considerations. This should also be the case for programs serving young children from language minority families. The diversity of cultures and social classes represented in early childhood programs requires that staff be bilingual, flexible, non-judgmental and creative in their design of programs to meet the needs of young language minority children.

Bilingual educators should be sensitive and especially trained to meet the needs of language minority families. They should understand the processes of first- and second-language acquisition. They should be sensitive to the needs of all family members from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. Bilingual educators can do much to counteract the prevailing tendency to view members of language minority groups as deficient peoples whose children are in need of remediation.

Consistent funding for quality early childhood programs

Weikart, Epstein, Schweinhart, and Bond (1978) found that well-designed early childhood programs can lessen the need for remediation and other special services as well as decrease the number of teen pregnancies, juvenile delinquents and high school dropouts. Despite extensive research findings as well as the recommendations of national organizations, early childhood education programs are constantly struggling for funds. Programs come into and go out of existence with underpaid staff. This results in high turnover in as well as a dearth of qualified staff. Mitchell (1989) notes that "community institutions of all sorts will have to shoulder their share of the responsibility for making high quality early childhood programs widely available and readily accessible" (p. 672).

Implications. Public schools will continue to play an increasing role in the care and education of young children. The role of public schools in the last five years has grown and will continue to grow. "Public schools will continue to provide services to young children through the current federal categorical programs, through child care services funded through state-subsidized (prekindergarten) programs, and through coordinated efforts with Head Start" (Mitchell 1989, p. 668). The diversity of services within public schools results in problems related to uniform standards of service delivery, teacher preparation, and program management—factors that relate directly to program quality.

Communication and sharing of resources will help to ensure stable quality programs for all young children. Bilingual education program staff should be encouraged to work cooperatively with staff in existing well-designed early childhood programs. The special skills and training of the bilingual educator will ensure that programs will be developed that are culturally relevant to and respectful of language minority children. Resources must be generated to provide for comprehensive, affordable, quality care for all young children.

Conclusion

Faced with increased stress, poverty, changing lifestyles, demographics, and social issues, the language minority family requires services that strengthen the family so that it may nurture and support the development of healthy, competent young children.

Comprehensive, developmental early childhood programs can be designed to meet these family needs. Programs can and should be developed in such a manner that parents are respected and are actively involved.

Developmentally appropriate practices can assist the educator to design comprehensive programs to serve the social/emotional, physical, and cognitive needs of every participant child. All children should be served within the context of the family and community with individual differences respected and valued.

Bilingual educators need to counteract the prevailing view that language minority families suffer from deficits of one type or another. They need to orient parents and reinforce the strengths of each and every family. This requires skills in cross-cultural communication, awareness, and empowerment strategies. Educators need to examine their program goals to ensure that children are individually appreciated and that their home culture is valued. Bilingual educators need to become familiar with various cultural developmental milestones so that appropriate activities can be designed to serve the whole child. Bilingual educators also require individual support through training and staff development opportunities in order to allow them to provide effective developmental experiences for young language minority children.

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